

# **Johnson City Founder Invented a Threshing Machine, Research by Judge Williams Shows**

## **New Early Facts on Early History of Section Revealed**

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**By Judge Samuel Cole Williams**

It has escaped recollection, even to his descendants, that Henry Johnson, whose name Johnson City bears, was other than a farmer and merchant. However, this writer has just uncovered the fact that he was, as a young man, **an inventor**.

In the issue of the magazine Tennessee Farmer, of October, 1836, appeared an advertisement of Johnson's Patented Thrasher as follows:

**Johnson's Thrashing Machine.** We certify that we have seen in operation, by two horse power, this machine which, thrashing at the rate of 48 dozen of wheat per hour, which is effectually cleaned. Signed - John G. Ruble, Archibald Williams, William G. Looney, Jesse B. Hunter, George W. Hoss, Henry Massengill, John Hoss, Michael Massengill.

Rights for Sale: The thrasher may be seen in operation at the plantations of Mrs. Sarah Hammer and William Massengill in Washington County. Apply at John Hoss on Brush Creek, or at the subscriber in the neighborhood of said Hoss.

*Henry Johnson, September 6, 1836*

*Patented by Johnson, May 29 1835*

The records of the Patent Office in Washington show that the machine was patented in the name of "Henry Johnson of Washington County, Tennessee," May 29, 1835, and the drawings for the thrasher, then called "thrasher" have been procured and they are illustrated in this article.

In the first half century of the 1800's and long afterwards wheat was the leading money crop of Washington County, with the county being premier among the counties of Tennessee for wheat production. The Washington County grain was noted and sought for because of its

hardness and milling quality. Flour mills abounded and the business men of Jonesborough, as well as the millers, formed small syndicates which sent the flour down the Watauga, Holston, and Tennessee Rivers to markets as far to the south as North Alabama and North Mississippi. Our law reports give glimpse of such. For example, the leading mercantile firms of Jonesborough - Crouch and Emmerson (W. Crouch and W.B. Emmerson) and Carter and Jones (David W. Carter and James H. Jones) combined in what may be termed a small syndicate to ship flour down the rivers.

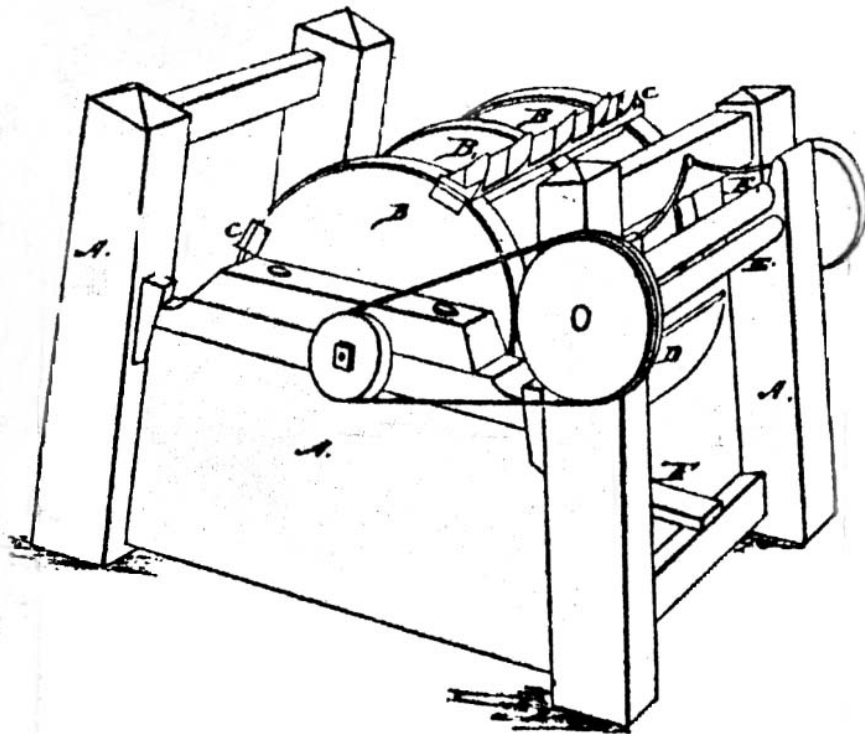
**To profit from the thriving milling business, Henry Johnson turned his efforts to the invention, manufacture, and sale of a threshing machine.** It may well be doubted that he was very successful in this laudable enterprise. **His market was too limited;** in those days before the coming of the railroads, East Tennessee was comparatively speaking, a secluded land. It was difficult to find cheap or adequate transportation for such manufactured products as this thresher. Shipments, almost perforce, went down the waters and Washington County was primarily interested in shipping flour and articles made of iron. Little wheat was grown below Knoxville, and almost none in Alabama and Mississippi, which were cotton-raising regions. Too, Johnson's was not the first thresher to be patented and manufactured and he had to meet competition from Pennsylvania and the Valley of Virginia.

The Thomas B. Emmerson mentioned was the son of Judge Thomas Emmerson, an ex-judge of the Tennessee Supreme Court who had on retiring from the bench moved from Knoxville (**of which town he had been the first mayor**) to Jonesborough and engaged in the practice of law and the editing of a newspaper. In 1835-36 he established the "Tennessee Farmer" and believed it to be the first purely agricultural journal of the Central South. If this surmise is correct, ancient Jonesborough has an added distinction: the publication of the first such journal in addition to being the home of the first organ devoted solely to the emancipation of slaves - Elihu Embree's "The Emancipator" - a magazine from the 1820s.

The farm of John Hoss was located on what is today the Carnegie Addition of our city, his residence having stood on the site of "Orchard Place," the home of Mr. and Mrs. Allen Harris. That modern name has an unsuspected genesis: It was to the first Hoss in the region, Jacob, father of John, that the "Hoss apple" was propagated and destined to win a reputation of excellence throughout the land. Unhappily it was "improved" out of existence along with the succulent "Indiana peach" of happy memories.

As by **way of coincidence**, the first mayor (yet to be) of Johnson City, Henry Johnson, advertised the heir of his inventive genius in a journal founded and edited by Knoxville's first mayor.

The advertisement shows those who were among the progressive farmers of the 1830's in Washington, Carter, and lower Sullivan Counties. Henry Johnson married a daughter of John Hoss, nearby where the young couple was living, is the fair inference. The Hoss home was a log structure which later gave place to a house of more distinction. Another inference equally as fair is that the first "manufacturing plant" within our city limits was on this Hoss estate, and run by the first merchant, railroad agent, and mayor of Johnson City. An oil portrait of Henry Johnson, painted by one of his descendants is destined for donation to the Mayne Williams Library. A duplicate should hang in the office of the mayor or room of the city commissioners in the municipal building along-side a portrait of Tipton Jobe, a public benefactor of his day.



Henry Johnson's Patented "Thrashing Machine"